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SUBJECT: KARBALA UPDATE ON FOUR KEY SECTORS

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¶1. This is a PRT Karbala Najaf Diwaniyah unclassified cable.

¶2. SUMMARY AND COMMENT: On September 22, PRT Karbala traveled with the support of 3ID Division Airlift to the Karbala Provincial Joint Communication Center to meet with the Provincial Council Chairman, Provincial Council members and Director Generals. Subjects included health service delivery, education sector, agriculture and tourism. Most importantly, the increased number of potential partners among the present government officials revealed that the influence of neighboring countries by way of dumping key goods into the market is not welcome.

AGRICULTURE

¶3. The PC Agriculture Chairman, Dr. Abbas Naser Hasany, explained that the irrigation canals and practices in Karbala are badly outdated and low yielding. Worse yet, he highlighted a common complaint that produce imported from neighboring countries (read: Iran) were so competitively priced that farmers found it more cost effective to buy, rather than grow, their own fruits and vegetables. This phenomenon applies to citrus (for which Karbala is a well known grower), dates, tomatoes and cucumbers in particular. Further complicating issues are pests, funguses and parasites that plague the fields. Addressing production levels and the costs of inputs was the key focus of Dr. Abbas' presentation.

EDUCATION

¶4. Education is suffering from limited physical resources and a growing number of students. Internal displacement is to blame for this increase, according to Mr. Shams al-Deen Hameed Majeed the PC committee chairman for Primary Education, increasing the total student body of Karbala schools so that 335 school houses are used in multiple shifts to serve 490 schools of children. In some of the more densely populated areas, school buildings are housing three shifts, requiring that class times not exceed 15 minutes. Funding teacher salaries is the priority of the Karbala Education Ministry, leaving little surplus to procure teaching materials and school supplies, much less the 105 additional school houses that the province would like to build. In 2006 the provincial government funded the construction of seven school houses and the expansion of 42 school houses. Continuing with this trend, in 2007 the Karbala government funded the nine new school houses and the expansion of 38 other facilities.

TOURISM

¶5. Religious tourism is a key social and religious activity among Shi'a Muslims that draws hundreds of thousands of visitors to Karbala. In addition to the Shrines, there are more than 318

touristic sites that the Director General of Tourism would like to develop. The hotel industry has yet to catch up with the surge of visitors, providing only a maximum of 23,000 beds. Eighteen restaurants with an average size less than 800 sq meters are less than adequate to provide services for the current and potential number of tourists interested in visiting Karbala. Worse yet, local interlocutors describe militia activity on the streets harassing restaurant and coffee shop goers and pressuring women to be home before sunset.

HEALTH SECTOR

¶ 6. The health sector in Karbala is benefiting from four major government-funded projects to increase available medical care and services. Among those projects are a new blood bank, an expanded morgue, a medical waste treatment facility, and various improvements to the Hussein Hospital. Since 2003, 20 health centers have been constructed, nine of which were funded by the USG. Dr. Haider, the PC health committee member, explained that Karbala needs additional hospitals in Ain Tamur and Hindiyah districts, because their populations have grown considerably as a result of internal displacement from Baghdad, Diyala and Anbar. He requested support to engage international agencies and organizations to assist in the improvement of health care services in the province.

BIOGRAPHIC NOTES

- Abd Al' al Yaseen Mohammed al-Yasiry is the Provincial Council Chairman and is a member of the Iraqi Democratic Current. He is currently finishing a law degree and over the course of the last year has been willing to visit the Regional Embassy Office monthly.

- Sheikh Falah Hassan Atiya is one of the last remaining Fadheela Virtue Party members on the provincial council and

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serves as the chairman of the reconstruction committee. Only recently has he reengaged with the PRT following a year long boycott by Fadheela in Karbala in protest of the June 2006 detention of Sheikh al-Zubeidy the former Provincial Council Chairman.

- Dr. Razzoul Aboot Hasan is the provincial government engineer and assistant to Governor Aqeel.

- Dr. Haider Abd al-Ameer Hasan is a provincial council member and on the Health Committee Member. He was elected on the 320 list and is known as a member of ISCI.

- Dr. Abbas Naser Hasany is a provincial council member and serves on the Agriculture and Irrigation committee. He is an independent elected on the 113 ticket but is thought by previous staff of the PRT to be a Sadrist sympathizer.

- Shams al-Deen Hameed Majeed is among the few Da'wa Provincial Council members and is the chairman of the primary education committee. Mr. Shams is also the brother of the Karbala Businessman Union chairman, Hatham M.S. Aboot.

- Husein Hameed is the Director General of Tourism, he also participated in the last tourism meeting held in June, 2007.

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SIMMONS